ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 44
NATION
20-27 July 1985

THE GOUZENKO CASE

The Documents That Weren't There

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Last March the publication of Soviet diplomat Arkady Shevchenko's memoir, *Breaking with Moscow*, an account of his secret life as an informer for the Central Intelligence Agency while serving as an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, found its way to the front pages of the nation's press. The Shevchenko affair, coming in the midst of other spy allegations—the latest, the John A. Walker Jr. spy ring, as American as apple pie—has fueled the Administration's campaign to restrict freedom in the name of security.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger suggested that convicted spies should be shot. The House of Representatives passed a bill setting the death penalty for military espionage during peacetime and permitting polygraph examinations for as many as 4.5 million civilian and military employees of the Pentagon. Recently, there have been calls for wholesale revision of Federal security procedures, new restrictions on the Freedom of Information Act, a drastic step-up in counterintelligence activities and a C.I.A.-sponsored equivalent of the Official Secrets Acts of Britain and Canada [see Lois Sheinfeld, "Washington vs. the Right to Know," *The Nation*, April 13].

Not since September 5, 1945, when Igor Gouzenko, a 26-year-old code clerk in the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, defected to the West, has a Soviet turncoat caused such a brouhaha. Yet the Shevchenko story seems to have begun to unravel. Edward Jay Epstein, writing in *The New Republic*, has identified a series of contradictions and falsehoods in the Shevchenko account which have led him to conclude, "Shevchenko's book is a fraud on the same level as Clifford Irving's fake about Howard Hughes."

The dangers of passing hasty "security" measures in an overheated political atmosphere should by now be obvious. (For example, the Internal Security Act of 1950—providing for, among other things, compulsory detention of "security risks" in time of national emergency—was passed in response to newspaper headlines about cold war spying.) But for those still harboring doubt, new evidence has just now come to light in the Gouzenko case that, at a minimum, should serve as a dramatic reminder of the importance of insisting on hard facts and documentation whenever cold war imagery of spies, espionage and threats to national security are invoked to justify intrusions on our open society.

According to the two-man Canadian Royal Commission that investigated the case in 1946, the secret documents Gouzenko took with him pointed to the existence of a twenty-seven-person Soviet spy ring operating in Canada and other parts of North America. The apparat's primary target, the commission concluded, had been the secret of the atomic bomb, which the spies were said to have obtained with stunning success. This winter, the evidence on which the commission based its findings was declassified by the Canadian government, making it possible for the first time to get a comprehensive look at the affair.

The Gouzenko case is cited by historians as a watershed in relations between the Soviet Union and the West, the end of wartime amity and the beginning of cold war distrust. It was no coincidence that Winston Churchill, when declaring that "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," in his famous 1946 speech at Fulton, Missouri, placed the Canadian "atom spies" at the top of his list of Soviet perfidies. Other commentators, like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in *The Vital Center*, said that Gouzenko's evidence made it clear that Communists' beliefs and speech were inseparable from "illegal acts" and thus threatened national security.

The standard view of the Canadian spy case, in terms of the damage to national security, is summed up by William Manchester in his social history *The Glory and the Dream*. The Canadian spies, Manchester wrote, stole "hundreds of pages of closely written data describing in detail" how to construct an atomic bomb. He concluded, "The Russians could scarcely have learned more about nuclear weapons had they been full partners in the undertaking."

What is not widely known is that all the published evidence for the existence of a Canadian atom spy network derives from the 733-page report the Royal Commission issued June 27, 1946. The men and women the Royal Commission identified as spies on the basis of "cover names" contained in the secret documents Gouzenko removed from the Soviet Embassy were tried for various offenses in the 1940s. But not one of them was indicted, tried or convicted of espionage—that is, of passing secret information to a foreign power—in Canada.* Indeed, in none of the trials did the government allege they had stolen atomic secrets. Moreover, sixteen members of the alleged ring were cleared of all charges. Of the others, five were found guilty of a conspiracy to obtain fake passports to enable Canadian nationals to fight on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War, and five were convicted of violations of Canada's sweeping Official Secrets Act. In the end, people went free or were convicted based on the degree to which they acknowledged their political beliefs and activities, not [as far as any documentary evidence shows] because of what Gouzenko's documents supposedly revealed about them.

Another nagging issue in the case is the credibility of Gouzenko himself. The accused were never confronted with

*Alan Nunn May, who was accused of being a member of the ring, pleaded guilty in England. Under the provisions of Britain's Official Secrets Act, full details of May's confession are still not available.

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his charges before the commission, and their lawyers were even denied access to Gouzenko's testimony before the commission. After Gouzenko's defection in 1945, he lived under the protection of the Canadian government. He devoted the rest of his life to keeping his story before the public and silencing critics with lawsuits. It can fairly be said that he made a lucrative career out of preserving his image as a Soviet defector.

He sold the rights to his story to Hollywood for a reputed $100,000. He collected more than a quarter-million dollars from two books bearing his byline, one of which, a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, was widely translated. Laudatory articles by or about him (he was reported to have charged $1,000 for an interview) appeared over the years. He was a frequent commentator on matters relating to Soviet espionage, making many appearances on television (always wearing a hood) and on radio (at times disguising his voice through a filter device). The late Senator Joseph McCarthy attempted to get Gouzenko to appear before his subcommittee, but the Canadian government wouldn't permit him to cross the border. In 1979, three years before his death, the Toronto *Star* reported that Gouzenko lived on a two-acre estate in a house said to be worth $500,000.

His litigiousness brought in additional income and served to silence and intimidate would-be critics. The files of the Canadian Press news service in Toronto reveal that he brought more than a dozen lawsuits for libel, winning retractions, apologies, payment of counsel fees or money damages in many of them.* On June 7, 1968, the *Star* published an editorial that characterized as "hate literature and poison" a pamphlet published under Gouzenko's byline. Among other things, the pamphlet implied that Prime Ministers Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau were Communist agents. Despite Gouzenko's threats, the newspaper refused to apologize or retract its words, and he sued for libel. In 1974, the court found for the *Star* and ordered Gouzenko to pay the newspaper's legal costs (at the time of his death, in 1982, he still had not done so).

Only after Gouzenko's death did Canadian authors publish critical books about him. In the past year, three books have appeared, all written before the release of the Canadian Royal Commission documents. They are: *Gouzenko: The Untold Story*, an oral history by John Sawatsky; *Emma*, by June Callwood; and Merrily Weisbord's *The Strangest Dream*, a heart-wrenching account of how the Canadian left has for forty years "bought" the Gouzenko story lock, stock and barrel.

Sawatsky, a prizewinning journalist with a strong background in security matters, interviewed just about every living government official, officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (R.C.M.P.), lawyer, journalist and neighbor who ever had dealings with Gouzenko. Although Sawatsky takes no position on the findings of the Royal Commission and of the Canadian courts, he has assembled a collection of eyewitness portraits that variously describe Gouzenko as a "son of a bitch," a "scoundrel," a "bit of a nut case" who was "money-grubbing" and "thoroughly unreliable," a "spoiled brat," a "cheat" and a man incapable of writing anything by himself who stiffed his ghostwriters. He was also described as an egomaniac. According to the R.C.M.P. deputy who was in charge of his security for many years, "Gouzenko thought that only two men in the world mattered: Winston Churchill and himself."

"All he could talk about was worldly possessions," recalled a neighbor. Others said he thought "the world owed him a lot, especially the Canadian Government," and "he was constantly clamoring for more money from the state." (The government awarded him a lifetime pension which, when last reported in 1975, paid him $1,075 a month, tax free, with a built-in cost of living increase. A Canadian businessman, Frank Ahearn, gave him a lifetime annuity.) A lawyer who raised more than $67,000 from anonymous sources ostensibly to help Gouzenko pay off his debts called him "a plain son of a bitch, a cheat from the word go, as greedy as anyone you'd ever know."

Gouzenko became not only the key witness but also the only unfettered spokesman on the case. Everyone else involved was prohibited from talking about it under pain of five years' imprisonment. This gag rule applied across the board, to R.C.M.P. officers, court attendants, stenographers, witnesses called before the Royal Commission and in the subsequent trials, friends, family members, lawyers and the defendants themselves. The defendants were unable to obtain transcripts of their own testimony or copies of documents used against them by the commission. The trial records are unavailable—either destroyed, "lost" or sequestered in sealed files. For nearly forty years, the only public information on the case consisted of newspaper stories, Gouzenko's writings and the interim and final reports issued by the Royal Commission. All the exhibits entered as evidence before the commission were impounded, not to be released until 1986.

On January 7 of this year, however, the government released almost all of the exhibits before the Royal Commission. Solicitor General Elmer MacKay said that 580 of the approximately 1,000 exhibits the commission had examined would be declassified. The declassified materials, he assured the press, included all "those conveyed by Mr. Gouzenko personally to the Canadian authorities."

Although the bulk of the material had to be catalogued and microfilmed, MacKay did release to the press photocopies of nine handwritten pages in Russian which were identified in the press kit as the texts of eight telegrams sent from the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa to Moscow in July, August and September 1945. They were signed by "Grant," identified in the Royal Commission report as a cover name for Col. Nikolai Zabotin, Soviet military attaché in Ottawa, and addressed to "the Director." According to the accompanying English translations, the telegrams contained numerous references to presumed espionage activities (clandes-

* Some of these suits were settled by defendants for various reasons, including unwillingness to bear the costs and risks of lengthy litigation.

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tine meetings and the like) and also to espionage targets (government policies and plans for bombs of various types, including the atomic bomb that was "thrown on Japan," as the translation put it). These allusions to espionage were ascribed to various mysterious individuals, known as Debouz, Prometheus, Gray, Alec, Alek, Grant, Bacon, the Professor, Martin, Dekanzov, Piat and Badeau. The press kit identified these as cover names for the accused spies, but this attribution seems puzzling in light of the commission report's statement that Gouzenko had never known, seen or worked with any of these persons.

These materials are of dubious provenance. The press kit contained no proof that the nine handwritten pages in Russian were the texts of telegrams sent by the Soviet Embassy to Moscow, or that the handwriting belonged to Colonel Zabotin. Also curious was the four-page handwritten statement Gouzenko made on October 10, 1945, included among the documents MacKay released. In it he explained why he defected, charged that the Soviet Union was preparing for a war with the West and castigated his homeland for having committed all manner of crimes save one: atomic espionage. The charge that would emerge as the central finding in the commission's report is not even mentioned. Moreover, he said nothing about *any* documents.

Any hope I had that the rest of the material would shed light on the affair was dashed this spring when I examined it. The remaining documentary evidence—and I use the term advisedly—is a hodgepodge, reminiscent of one of Professor Irwin Corey's doubletalk monologues. Taking up six reels of microfilm, it consists of numerous official government documents, originating in the United States, Britain and Canada, and a welter of other materials, including:

> the 1943 Montreal telephone directory, passport applications, travel and expense vouchers, job applications, army service records, blueprints of defense plants, government manuals, identity cards, voting records, registration forms, hotel and meal receipts, newspaper clippings, copies of editorials from Canadian Communist Party newspapers, leaflets from the Young Communist League, June 1935 correspondence of the National Conference of Friendship with the U.S.S.R., pamphlets from the National Council of Canadian-Soviet Friendship, a brief history of the Soviet diplomatic mission to Canada from 1924 through 1945, passenger lists of steamships, oaths administered by the Immigration Office and the Royal Commission, income tax returns, library cards, private correspondence going back to 1939, railroad timetables, photographs of individuals named in the final report and their private correspondence going back to 1939, pre-Gouzenko R.C.M.P. dossiers on the accused, samples of the handwriting of Colonel Zabotin and other diplomats from 1943 through 1945, records of all stationery and other office supplies purchased by the Soviet Embassy and an itemized list of four cartons of books, including standard works by Marx and Lenin removed from an alleged spy's home—and so on and on.

What is one to make of this jumble? With no indication as to when any of the exhibits were obtained by the R.C.M.P., how they related to espionage or any wrongdoing and, for the most part, no indication of when they were placed in evidence at the hearings, it is impossible to determine their significance, authenticity or relationship to other evidence. And what of the most eagerly awaited prize of all: the 108 secret documents the Royal Commission said Gouzenko took with him from the embassy? As with the eight telegrams, there is no physical evidence to prove that the originals existed or came from the Soviet Embassy. It is also interesting to note that it was not until March 2, 1946, that the commission or any Canadian official stated publicly that Gouzenko had taken the embassy materials. That was more than two weeks after the alleged spies were arrested by the R.C.M.P. and Gouzenko began testifying, and more than six months after he left the Soviet Embassy for the last time.

In addition to all of the above, the record contains a glaring and critical gap. The recent books on the Gouzenko case reveal that he spent five and a half months at Camp X before his defection was made public. The Royal Commission did not ask Gouzenko a single question about this period, and no investigator has got through the government's stonewall about what happened there. Sawatsky describes the process Gouzenko underwent as "debriefing." But throughout World War II, Sir William Stephenson, head of British intelligence in North America, maintained a laboratory at Camp X which produced forged letters and other documents of high quality.* How do we know that the representatives of the British, Canadian and U.S. intelligence services who spoke with Gouzenko at Camp X were not giving as well as receiving information?

So despite the voluminous evidence that has become available, questions persist. We may never know which of Gouzenko's revelations were fact and which were fiction. The point is that the temptation for Western governments to manipulate facts in order to create anti-Soviet hysteria is considerable. As this case shows, evidence once trumpeted as "definitive" or "damning" may, years later, turn out to be an undifferentiated mass of items that are questionable, or worse. This is not to say that Gouzenko's story was a complete or partial fabrication but to point out that after forty years, crucial evidence is still being withheld and important questions remain unanswered. It is merely to call for subjecting the evidence in such cases, when it appears, to what Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called "the acid bath of cynicism."

The current rash of spy cases may signify an escalation in K.G.B. activities or, more likely, an escalation in the number of cases brought for political reasons. We should not let them be used to damage arms control negotiations, suggest that all liberals and radicals are spies and traitors or justify antidemocratic regulations and legislation.

Too many unknowns remain to draw any morals from the Gouzenko case. But we would do well to keep in mind the

*Those forgery operations have been described in *No Chip on My Shoulder*, by Eric Maschwitz; *Room 3603*, by H. Montgomery Hyde; and *A Man Called Intrepid* and *Intrepid's Last Case*, by William Stevenson.

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comment made to Sawatsky by Canadian journalist Ian Adams, long before the recent release of documents:

> [Gouzenko's] defection came at a wonderful time when there was tremendous resistance from the scientists involved in developing the atomic bomb. They wanted to see an open book on the development of nuclear power with everybody collaborating so that it wouldn't become the ungodly arms race that it did become and is today. So if Gouzenko hadn't fallen into the western intelligence services' lap, they would have had to invent somebody like him. □

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